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The Cult of Virginity

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In the moments after I first had sex, my then boyfriend—lying down next to me over his lint-covered blanket—grabbed a pen from his nightstand and drew a heart on the wall molding above his bed with our initials and the date inside. The only way you could see it was by lying flat on the bed with your head smashed up against the wall. Crooked necks aside, it was a sweet gesture, one that I'd forgotten about until I started writing this book.

The date seemed so important to us at the time, even though the event itself was hardly awe-inspiring. There was the expected fumbling, a joke about his fish printed boxers, and ensuing condom difficulties. At one point, his best friend even called to see how things were going. I suppose romance and discretion are lost on sixteen-year-olds from Brooklyn. Yet we celebrated our “anniversary” every year until we broke up, when Josh left for college two years before me and met a girl with a lip ring.

I've often wondered what that date marks—the day I became a woman? Societal standards would have me believe that it was the day I became morally sullied, but I fail to see how anything that lasts less than five minutes can have such an indelible ethical impact—so it's not that, either.

Really, the only meaning it had (besides a little bit of pain and a lot of postcoital embarrassment) was the meaning that Josh and I ascribed to it. Or so I thought. I hadn't counted on the meaning my peers, my parents, and society would imbue it with on my behalf.

From that date on I was a “sexually active teen,” a term often used in tandem with phrases like “at risk,” or alongside warnings about drug and alcohol use. Through the rest of high school, whenever I had a date, my peers assumed that I had had sex because my sexuality had been

defined by that one moment when my virginity was lost. It meant that I was no longer discriminating, no longer “good.” The perceived change in my social value wasn't lost on my parents, either; before I graduated high school, my mother found an empty condom wrapper in my bag and remarked that if I kept having sex, no one would want to marry me.*

I realize that my experience isn't necessarily representative of most women's—everyone has their own story—but there are common themes in so many young women's sexual journeys. Sometimes it's shame. Sometimes it's violence. Sometimes it's pleasure. And sometimes it's simply nothing to write home about.

The idea that virginity (or loss thereof) can profoundly affect women's lives is certainly nothing new. But what virginity is, what it was, and how it's being used now to punish women and roll back their rights is at the core of the purity myth. Because today, in a world where porn culture and reenergized abstinence movements collide, the moral panic myth about young women's supposed promiscuity is diverting attention from the real problem—that women are still being judged (sometimes to death) on something that doesn't really exist: virginity.

Since I've become convinced that virginity is a sham being perpetrated against women, I decided to turn to other people to see how they “count” sex. Most say it's penetration. Some say it's oral sex. My closest friend, Kate, a lesbian, has the best answer to date (a rule I've followed since she shared it with me): It isn't sex unless you've had an orgasm. That's a pleasure based, non-heteronormative way of marking intimacy if I've ever heard one. Of course, this way of defining sex isn't likely to be very popular among the straight-male sect, given that some would probably end up not counting for many of their partners.

But any way you cut it, virginity is just too subjective to pretend we can define it.

*After years of denying she ever said such a thing, to her benefit, my mother finally sheepishly apologized.

Laura Carpenter, a professor at Vanderbilt University and the author of *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences*, told me that when she wrote her book, she was loath to even use the word “virginity,” lest she propagate the notion that there’s one concrete definition for it.¹

“What is this thing, this social phenomenon? I think the emphasis put on virginity, particularly for women, causes a lot more harm than good,” said Carpenter.²

This has much to do with the fact that “virgin” is almost always synonymous with “woman.” Virgin sacrifices, popping cherries, white dresses, supposed vaginal tightness, you name it. Outside of the occasional reference to the male virgin in the form of a goofy movie about horny teenage boys, virginity is pretty much all about women. Even the dictionary definitions of “virgin” cite an “unmarried girl or woman” or a “religious woman, esp. a saint.”³ No such definition exists for men or boys.

It’s this inextricable relationship between sexual purity and women—how we’re either virgins or not virgins—that makes the very concept of virginity so dangerous and so necessary to do away with.

Admittedly, it would be hard to dismiss virginity as we know it altogether, considering the meaning it has in so many people’s—especially women’s—lives. When I suggest that virginity is a lie told to women, I don’t aim to discount or make light of how important the current social idea of virginity is for some people. Culture, religion, and social beliefs influence the role that virginity and sexuality play in women’s lives—sometimes very positively. So, to be clear, when I argue for an end to the idea of virginity, it’s because I believe sexual intimacy should be honored and respected, but that it shouldn’t be revered at the expense of women’s well-being, or seen as such an integral part of female identity that we end up defining ourselves by our sexuality.

I also can’t discount that no matter what personal meaning each woman gives virginity, it’s people who have social and political influence who ultimately get to decide what virginity means—at least, as it affects women on a large scale.

VIRGINITY: COMMODITY, MORALITY, OR FARCE?

It’s hard to know when people started caring about virginity, but we do know that men, or male-led institutions, have always been the ones that get to define and assign value to virginity.

Long gone are the days when women were property or so we’d like to think. It’s not just wedding traditions or outdated laws that name women’s virginity as a commodity; women’s virginity, our sexuality, is still assigned a value by a movement with more power and influence in American society than we’d probably like to admit.

I like to call this movement the virginity movement.* And it is a movement, indeed—with conservatives and evangelical Christians at the helm, and our government, school systems, and social institutions taking orders. Composed of antifeminist think tanks like the Independent Women’s Forum and Concerned Women for America; abstinence only “educators” and organizations; religious leaders; and legislators with regressive social values, the virginity movement is much more than just the same old sexism; it’s a targeted and well-funded backlash that is rolling back women’s rights using revamped and modernized definitions of purity, morality, and sexuality. Its goals are mired in old-school gender roles, and the tool it’s using is young women’s sexuality.

And, like it or not, the members of the virginity movement are the people who are defining virginity—and, to a large extent, sexuality—in America. Now, instead of women’s virginity being explicitly bought and sold with dowries and business deals, it’s being defined as little more than a stand-in for actual morality.

It’s genius, really. Shame women into being chaste and tell them that all they have to do to be “good” is not have sex.

*The “abstinence movement” would be accurate, as would the “chastity movement.” But neither quite captures how this obsession really is about virginity, virgins, and an almost too-enthusiastic focus on young women’s sexuality. So the “virginity movement” seemed not only appropriate, but also a bit needling. Which I enjoy.

For women especially, virginity has become the easy answer—the morality quick fix. You can be vapid, stupid, and unethical, but so long as you've never had sex, you're a "good" (i.e., "moral") girl and therefore worthy of praise.

Present-day American society—whether through pop culture, religion, or institutions—conflates sexuality and morality constantly. Idolizing virginity as a stand-in for women's morality means that nothing else matters—not what we accomplish, not what we think, not what we care about and work for. Just if/how/whom we have sex with. That's all.

Just look at the women we venerate for not having sex: pageant queens who run on abstinence platforms, pop singers who share their virginal status, and religious women who "save themselves" for marriage.

But for plenty of women across the country, it is special. Staying "pure" and "innocent" is touted as the greatest thing we can do. However, equating this inaction with morality not only is problematic because it continues to tie women's ethics to our bodies, but also is downright insulting because it suggests that women can't be moral actors. Instead, we're defined by what we don't do—our ethics are the ethics of passivity.

But it's not only abstinence education or conservative propaganda that are perpetuating this message; you need look no further than pop culture for stark examples of how young people—especially young women—are taught to use virginity as an easy ethical road map.

A 2007 episode of the MTV documentary series *True Life* featured celibate youth.⁴ Among the teens choosing to abstain because of disease concerns and religious commitments was nineteen-year-old Kristin from Nashville, Tennessee. Kristin had cheated on her past boyfriends, and told the camera she'd decided to remain celibate until she feels she can be faithful to her current boyfriend. Clearly, Kristin's problem isn't sex—it's trust. But instead of dealing with the actual issues behind her relationship woes, this young woman was able to circumvent any real self-analysis by simply claiming to be abstinent. So long as she's chaste, she's good.

Or consider singer and reality television celebrity Jessica Simpson, who has made her career largely by playing on the sexy-virgin stereotype. Simpson, the daughter of a Baptist youth minister, started her singing career by touring Christian youth festivals and *True Love Waits* events. Even when she went mainstream, she publicly declared her virginity—stating that her father had given her a promise ring when she was twelve years old—and spoke of her intention to wait to have sex until marriage. Meanwhile, not surprisingly, Simpson was being marketed as a major sex symbol—all blond hair, breasts, and giggles.

Despite Simpson's public persona as an airhead women are supposed to want to be her, not only because she's beautiful by conventional standards, but also because she adheres to the social structures that tell women that they exist purely for men: as a virgin, as a sex symbol, or, in Simpson's case, as both. It doesn't matter that Simpson reveals few of her actual thoughts or moral beliefs; it's enough that she's "pure," even if that purity means she's a bit of a dolt.

For those women who can't keep up the front as well as someone like Simpson, they suffer heaps of judgment—especially when they fall off the pedestal they're posed upon so perfectly. American pop culture, especially, has an interesting new trend of venerating and fetishizing "pure" young women—whether they're celebrities, beauty queens, or just everyday young women—simply to bask in their eventual fall.

It's impossible to talk about tipped-over pedestals without mentioning pop singer Britney Spears. Spears, first made famous by her hit song "Baby One More Time" and its accompanying video, in which she appeared in a Catholic schoolgirl mini-uniform, was very much the American purity princess. She publicly declared her virginity and belief in abstinence before marriage, all the while being marketed—much like Simpson was—as a sex symbol. But unlike Simpson, Spears fell far from grace in the eyes of the American public. The most obvious indications of her decline were splashed across newspapers and entertainment weeklies

worldwide—a breakdown during which she shaved her head in front of photographers, and various pictures of her drunk and sans panties. But Spears began distancing herself from the virgin ideal long before these incidents hit the tabloids.

First, Spears got some press for moving in with then-boyfriend and fellow pop star Justin Timberlake. But the sexist brouhaha began in earnest when Spears was no longer considered “attractive,” because she started to gain weight, got pregnant, and no longer looked like a little girl. Pictures of her cellulite popped up on websites and gossip magazines nationwide, along with guesstimations about her weight and jokes about her stomach. Because “purity” isn’t just about not having sex, it’s about not being a woman—and instead being in a state of perpetual girlhood.

Shaming young women for being sexual is nothing new, but it’s curious to observe how the expectation of purity gets played out through the women who are supposed to epitomize the feminine ideal: the “desirable” virgin. After all, we rarely see women who aren’t conventionally beautiful idolized for their abstinence. And no matter how “good” you are otherwise—even if you’re an all-American beauty queen—if you’re not virginal, you’re shamed.

The desirable virgin is sexy but not sexual. She’s young, white, and skinny. She’s a cheerleader, a baby sitter; she’s accessible and eager to please. She’s never a woman of color. She’s never a low-income girl or a fat girl. She’s never disabled. “Virgin” is a designation for those who meet a certain standard of what women, especially younger women, are supposed to look like. As for how these young women are supposed to act? A blank slate is best.

[edited, 2009]

NOTES

1. Laura M. Carpenter. *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences* (New York: New York University Press, November 2005).
2. Laura M. Carpenter. Interview with the author, March 2008.
3. Dictionary.com definition of “virgin,” <http://dictionary.reference.com>.
4. MTV. “True Life: I’m Celibate,” July 2007, www.mtv.com/videos.

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“We Don’t Sleep Around Like White Girls Do”: Family, Culture, and Gender in Filipina-American Lives

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Sexuality, as a core aspect of social identity, is fundamental to the structuring of gender inequality (Millett 1970). Sexuality is also a salient marker of otherness and has figured prominently in racist and imperialist ideologies (Gilman 1985; Stoler 1991). Historically, the sexuality of subordinate groups—particularly that of racialized women—has been systematically stereotyped by the dominant groups.¹ At stake in these stereotypes is the construction of women of color as morally lacking in the areas of sexual restraint and traditional morality. Asian women—both in Asia and in the United States—have been racialized as sexually immoral, and the “Orient”—and its women—has long served as a site of European male-power fantasies, replete with lurid images of sexual license, gynecological aberrations, and general perversion (Gilman 1985). In colonial Asia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, female sexuality was a site for colonial rulers to assert their moral superiority and thus their supposed natural and legitimate right to rule. The colonial rhetoric of moral superiority was based on the construction of colonized Asian women as subjects of sexual desire and fulfillment and European colonial women as the paragons of virtue and the bearers of a redefined

¹Writing on the objectification of black women, Patricia Hill Collins (1991) argues that popular representations of black females—mammy, welfare queen, and Jezebel—all pivot around their sexuality, either desexualizing or hypersexualizing them. Along the same line, Native American women have been portrayed as sexually excessive (Green 1975), Chicana women as “exotic and erotic” (Mirande 1980), and Puerto Rican and Cuban women as “tropical bombshells, . . . sexy, sexed and interested” (Tafolla 1985, 39).